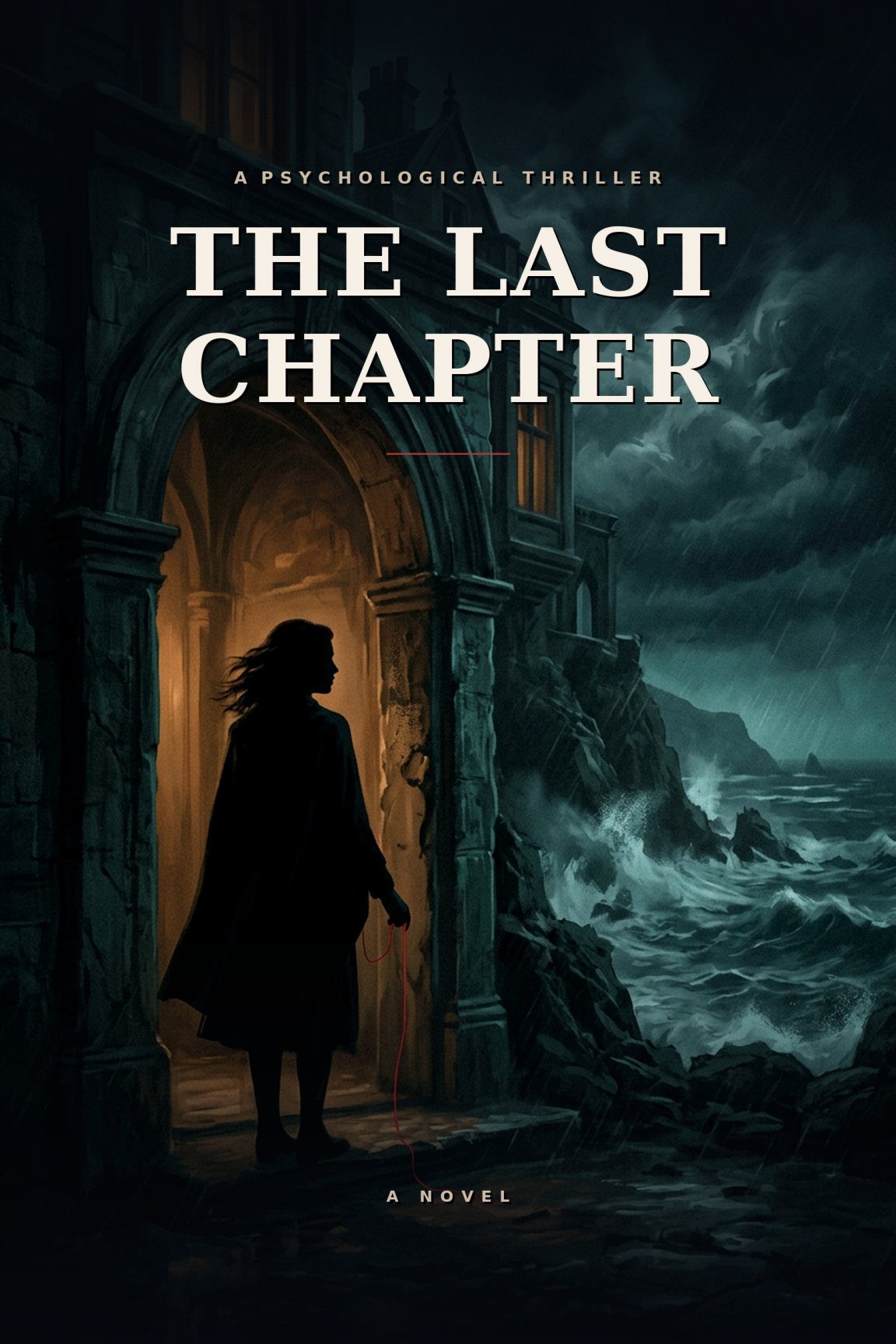

A PSYCHOLOGICAL THRILLER
THE LAST CHAPTER
A NOVEL

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PROLOGUE — THE MANUSCRIPT

Prologue — The Manuscript

The first page was waiting on the desk when Elena arrived.

It was a single sheet of paper, typed, with a red thread tied around the corner. The thread was the color of dried blood. The paper smelled of dust and salt.

She read it standing up, with her coat still on.

My husband is going to kill me. If you are reading this, he already has.

Elena turned the page over. There was nothing on the back.

She looked at the desk. The drawer was open. Inside, a stack of pages, a fountain pen, and a photograph of a woman standing on a beach, her face turned away from the camera.

The woman was Clara Vale.

Elena had been hired to finish Clara's memoir. She had not been told that the memoir would begin with a threat.

She sat down in the dead woman's chair and began to read.

The house was quiet in a way that felt deliberate. Not the quiet of an empty place, but the quiet of a room where someone has just stopped talking. Elena stood in the hallway and listened. Somewhere above her, a floorboard creaked. Somewhere below, a door closed.

She had grown up in houses that made noises. Her mother had said every house had a voice. Elena had never believed her until now.

She looked at the photograph on the desk. The woman on the beach was not looking at the camera. She was looking at something beyond it, something the photographer could not see. Her hand was raised, as if she were about to wave, or as if she were trying to stop someone from coming closer.

Elena put the photograph in her bag.

She did not know why she took it. She would ask herself that later, many times, in the years that followed. For now, she simply took it, the way a person takes a coat from a hook without thinking, because it is cold and the coat is there.

Then she went upstairs to the guest room and locked the door.

The next morning, Elena found Mrs. Bell in the kitchen.

The housekeeper was making tea. She did not look surprised to see her.

"You didn't sleep," she said.

"No."

"The house does that."

Elena sat at the table. "How long did you work for Clara?"

"Twenty years."

"Did you know her before she married him?"

"Yes."

"What was she like?"

Mrs. Bell set the cup down. "She was like a woman who had found a door and was afraid to open it."

"Was she afraid of him?"

"Everyone was afraid of him. That was the point."

"Did she ever talk about a journalist?"

Mrs. Bell's hands stopped. "No."

"Mrs. Bell."